



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 25
Issue 2 *December 1998*

Article 4

1-1-1998

The Past in the Present: What Is Civilization?

Michael A. Morse

Arthur Mitchell

HAN ON THE WEB UPDATE: Unfortunately, the website announced in our last number is not yet up and running, and the address given then is no longer current. But work continues, and we hope useful material will soon be accessible at <http://anthro.spc.uchicago.edu/~gwsjr/han/>

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

The Past in the Present: What is Civilization?

Michael A. Morse
University of Chicago

Alexander Henry Rhind, a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, died in 1863, leaving his entire estate, valued at £7,000, to the creation of a lectureship to be administered by the Society. Rhind had been a leading figure in the movement to reform Treasure Trove laws in order to promote government protection of antiquities. Having embraced the "three-age system" advanced by Scandinavian antiquaries and ethnologists, Rhind hoped that legal protection of antiquities would aid in the building of national collections in Edinburgh, Dublin, and London, allowing British and Irish archaeologists to flesh out the three ages of their domestic prehistory. Though he died at the age of 30, Rhind did much to reach these goals in his short life, but more significantly, in the legacy of his bequest. Under the terms of his will, each holder of the lectureship "shall be bound to deliver annually a course of not less than six lectures on some branch of archaeology, ethnology, ethnography, or allied topic" (*Procs. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* 14 Dec. 1874). Among the most notable of the early holders of the lectureship (which continues to this day) were J. Romilly Allen, Robert Munro, John Rhys, John Beddoe, Arthur Evans, and later, V. Gordon Childe.

The very first holder of the lectureship is not, however, so well known. After John Stuart declined the post, the Society offered it to Sir Arthur Mitchell, then Secretary of the Society, as well as Commissioner in Lunacy for Scotland and Professor of Ancient History to the Royal Scottish Academy. Mitchell delivered ten Rhind Lectures in all, six in 1876 under the title of "The Past in the Present," and four in 1878 under the title of "What is Civilization?" While later lectures in the series looked primarily at the objects and monuments of antiquity, Mitchell's approached the topic through an ethnographic narrative.

While travelling through Scotland Mitchell had observed present day uses of objects that could also be found in the archaeological record, and the lectures of the first series were dedicated to particular objects or object categories: the spindle and whorl, food-manufacturing items, houses, farm tools, stone implements, and associated superstitions. In part, Rhind was looking for insight into how these objects and traditions might have been used in antiquity. But he was also interested in how the knowledge behind the objects seemed to go through a process of degeneration, until the objects would take on a totally new meaning. Thus whorls were still in use in yarn manufacture in remote areas, but closer to roads and urban centers were instead venerated as charms.

In contrast to better-remembered figures of his day, Mitchell arrived at conclusions that challenged prevailing notions of progress. He delivered his lectures within two years of Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers' two seminal papers, "Principles of Classification," and "On the Evolution of Culture," which laid the foundation for Pitt-Rivers' evolutionist approach to material culture (Pitt-Rivers 1875a; 1875b). Mitchell's theory that forms of technology often degrade before they become obsolete not only challenged

Pitt-Rivers' belief in gradual evolutionary progress, but sounded a note of caution often still not heeded by archaeologists who assign an age to objects on the basis of typological expectations.

Finally, while Mitchell used evolutionary phrases such as "level of civilization," and did not use the term "culture" in a relativist sense, his overall message implied a certain relativism. At the very end of the second set of lectures, which were of a more abstract nature, in contrast to the series of case-studies of the first, he argued that "different patterns" are "not necessarily synonymous with different stages of progress" (Mitchell 1881: 246-7). Discussing the very nature of civilization, he defined it as "a complicated outcome of a war waged with Nature by man in Society to prevent her from putting into execution in his case her law of Natural Selection." His relativist interpretation of this definition follows from measuring the success of a civilization, not by its technological achievements, but by its success in this war with natural selection, in other words, in its ability to survive (Mitchell 1881: 188-9). Instead of attributing differences to race, Mitchell proposed a form of geographical determinism, tempered by a belief that the ideologies, or religions, of different societies make for a powerful "modifying influence" (Mitchell 1881: 248). Mitchell's incipient relativism, however, was tempered by his view that civilizations with the Christian religion were best suited to survive and grow, because of the Christian concept of an all-embracing, universal God.

**[From The Past in the Present: Lecture 1 (18 April, 1876)
"The Spindle and the Whorl" (Mitchell 1881: 19-42)]**

In the summer of 1864 I had occasion to visit Fetlar, one of the Shetland group of islands. As I walked from the landing-place to the nearest township I overtook a little boy, and, while I was asking him some questions about the people and places, I observed that he was giving shape with his pocket-knife to a piece of stone. At first I thought his occupation was the analogue of the purposeless whittle of the Yankee; but on looking more attentively at the results and progress of his cutting, I saw that he had some definite object in view, and I asked him what he intended to make out of the stone. "A whorl for my mother," was the ready reply. With equal readiness he gave me the half manufactured whorl, which I regarded as an important *find*. It is made of coarse steatite or soapstone, which is called Kleberstone in Shetland, and which is soft and easily cut.

As we walked on, I asked the boy if I should find a finished whorl in his mother's house. He answered me in the affirmative, just as we were close to her door, and I went in and told her what he had said. She immediately produced two spindles, each with a soapstone whorl on it, and I carried them both away. ...

During that day's sojourn in Fetlar, I had occasion to visit many houses, and in most of them I found the spindle and the whorl in actual use.

Perhaps, before I go farther, I should briefly explain what a whorl is, and how it happens to be an object of interest to antiquaries.

As it usually presents itself, a whorl is a perforated disk of stone, from an inch to two inches in diameter, and from a quarter to half an inch in thickness. It is placed on the spindle, in order to act by its weight as a fly-wheel – in other words, to make the spindle rotate easily, while still unloaded with yarn.

Stone is the material of which whorls are commonly made, and their usual form is that of a perforated disk; but they are also made of other materials, such as bone or burnt clay, and they have other forms, such as the sphere or cone. When I say this much in way of description, I have perhaps said enough for my present object. All I desire is, that their general construction and purpose be understood. I am not giving an account of whorls. I propose merely to tell some things about them which appear to me to teach lessons of caution to the student of antiquities.

I have still, however, to explain the interest which is taken by antiquaries in these objects. That such an interest exists is sufficiently shown by the fact that whorls appear in almost every museum of old things, whether in Europe or out of it; and they generally appear in considerable numbers. Nor is this otherwise than it should be, since whorls are found associated with the builders and occupants of our *brochs* and *eirde-houses*; in Anglo-Saxon and Carovingian graves; among the relics of the Swiss lake-dwellers; in the débris of that city which, according to Schliemann, had perished and was forgotten before the Troy of Homer had its foundations laid; among the vestiges of the Egyptians of the Pyramid times and the mound-builders of North America; associated, in short, with the "man without a story," not in special localities, but almost everywhere. An object of this kind has a proper place in collections of antiquities, since it may be almost, if not quite as old as anything there. It is at least as old as the art of spinning, which is the oldest industrial art of which we have knowledge, and which, moreover, is an art practiced at this present day by some of the least cultured people on the earth.

I have just said that I had seen this possibly ancient thing in process of being made, as well as largely in actual use, in the corner of a country which is in the very front rank of progress. The most primitive of all known methods of spinning is thus found holding its place among a people who have for generations been spinning by the aid of the most complex machinery – an art in its rudest state, side by side with the same art in its greatest perfection, both practised by the same people, the same in race, the same in capacity, the same in civilization, and, from many points of view, the same in culture. Can any one say that some of the inventions which congregate and culminate in our wonderful spinning machinery may not actually be due to a Fetlar man whose mother knitted stockings for him, when a child, of yarn which she had made with the spindle and the whorl? Such a thing is beyond question possible, for Fetlar yields men as good as any in the kingdom – as capable of doing that, or any other sort of intellectual work. Yet, if the woman I speak of were suddenly entombed, spindle in hand, and if, centuries after, she were exhumed, when nothing remained of her but her bones and her whorl, some zealous antiquary might show one reason at least for relegating her to prehistoric times.

As yet, only the island of Fetlar has been spoken of as the part of Scotland in which the spindle and whorl are to be found in actual use. But that island is by no means the only part. Women may be seen using them here and there all over Scotland, though chiefly, of course, in outlying regions, remote from highways or thoroughfares; that is, either actually remote or remote by some accident of position. ...

In some districts, where it has fully and completely died out, a point of much interest presents itself. In certain parts of the main-land of Shetland, for instance, quite within hail of Fetlar, there remains no knowledge either of the existence or use of such things as the spindle and whorl among the people; yet, a century back and less, they were common objects there. So is it also with some parts of the outer Hebrides, where the sudden disappearance of the spindle and whorl, and the complete oblivion into which all about them has fallen, made a deep impression on my mind. It did so because it happens that in these same districts whorls are still to be frequently seen. Being of stone, they do not rot away like spindles, and they

are often turned up in diggings about deserted townships. By those who so find them they are treated with a superstitious respect and care, being regarded as charms, and known under the name *Adder Stone*. ...

Out of some districts all knowledge of spindle and whorl alike may disappear. Both may be equally forgotten. But in other places the whorl may die out before the spindle, and this may happen in two ways. The form of the spindle may be so changed as to make it no longer necessary to weight it with a whorl. Instead of being a rod of wood, slender from end to end, it may be left thick at the lower end, where the mass of wood will then serve, like the whorl, the purposes of a fly-wheel. This is a late modification, and the reverse of an improvement, for it does not do all that is wanted so well as a spindle armed with a moveable whorl. It is one of those changes so often seen in the decline of a supplanted art, which are in the direction of a lower and not of a higher quality. It is a movement of deterioration indicative of coming death. The second way in which a whorl may disappear while the spindle remains in use is perhaps more interesting. It has twice come under my notice; once in the island of Islay, and once in the parish of Daviot, within fourteen miles of the city of Inverness. In a remote corner of the last parish I had occasion to visit a crofter's cottage in the autumn of 1866; and sitting at the door, on a *knockin' stane*, there was an old woman busily manufacturing yarn with a spindle. At the end of the spindle, instead of a whorl, there was a potato ...

I happened to have a stone whorl in my pocket when I saw this woman, and I showed it to her, but she had no knowledge of any such object – had never seen such a thing on the end of a spindle – and had used a potato, in the way I found her using it, for more than a quarter of a century. She thought, however, that she had once heard her mother speak of something which did away with the need of the potato. On being asked how she managed in the summer months, when potatoes were scarce, she answered that her spinning was done in the short and idle days of winter.

This woman had lived within a couple of hours' drive of a spinning mill and tweed factory, in which the best machinery was employed, yet she continued to use the spindle, with a potato for its fly-wheel! Though much closer to the centres of progress than the Fetlar woman, the art of spinning, as she practised it, was in a still ruder state. ...

I have spoken, and it is customary to speak, of the manufacture of yarn by the spindle and whorl as a rude practice, such as we might fittingly encounter among a barbarous and uncultured people. What it is desired now to show is that we are wrong as well as right in this. That which has superseded hand-spinning is certainly a thing vastly superior to it, and is assuredly the outcome of a higher culture; yet for all that, there went brains into the invention of the spindle and whorl; and it is beyond question that it can accomplish certain feats which no other machine ever invented can equal. It is a fact, though it may surprise some to learn it, that the hand-spinning women of India produce a yarn which is finer and has fewer filaments in it than any yarn otherwise or elsewhere manufactured. Repeated and serious efforts have been made by European spinners to produce the *gossamer thread* out of which are woven those marvelous muslins of Dacca to which have been given the poetic names of *The Evening Dew*, *The Running Water*, and *The Woven Air*. ...

... Progress in India has certainly not taken the directions which it has taken among us, or among the nations of Europe generally; but there may be great progress on lines which diverge very considerably from those on which we travel. All civilizations, whether in times far apart or in the same times, are not of one pattern. The differences, indeed, may be wide and deep. They are so, in point of fact, between us and

the races of India. These races, however, have shown a distinct and decided culture and civilization of their own. They possess a literature of no mean order; they have worked successfully in the fields of scientific research; they have acquired accomplishments in the application of the fine arts to manufactures which, at this very day, all the nations of Europe are trying to understand and copy; they co-operate, and there is a division of labor among them; they have laws, and armies for defence and aggression; and they have religious beliefs, which we regard as utterly and deplorably wrong, but which, nevertheless, are far from destitute of lofty conceptions, while the sincerity of those beliefs is attested in conduct with at least as much self-sacrifice and conscientiousness as Christian nations show in testimony of the reality of the convictions which they avow. ...

There is sometimes, it appears to me, an unwillingness to look at all sides of objects classed as ancient, lest something should be discovered which might reduce their age, and render them possibly modern and commonplace. To some, no doubt, it does make such a thing as a whorl a less interesting and curious object to know that it may be either of very great age, or, in the most literal sense, a thing of yesterday; but the study of antiquities has ceased to be the study of the merely curious, and takes rank now with the study of history. The love of the wonderful, however, still holds sway to no small extent, and often shows itself in the manner alluded to, that is, in a certain unwillingness to see what may overthrow accepted and cherished opinions. The very matter of spinning furnishes apt illustrations of this. For instance, the discovery of cloth in the mounds of Ohio was regarded as a fact so novel in itself, and so much at variance with the prevailing ideas as to the degree of civilization and knowledge of the arts among the mound-builders, that it was considered necessary to hesitate about making it public. It is easy to understand this feeling. It was probably thought that further research might modify the significance of the discovery. Yet why should there be hesitation about the publishing of what is believed to be a fact? Prevailing ideas are not things to be protected. If they rest on error or imperfect information, why should they not fall? The whole material from which archaeologists draw their conclusions is as yet scanty; and most of their conclusions can only be safely stated as probably correct in view of the information we possess, and as liable to change with a fuller knowledge. ...

The chief inferences which appear to flow from what has been said are the following:

1. A mode of meeting one of the requirements of man's existence in all cold or temperate regions, which is so simple as to be commonly spoken of as rude and primitive, may nevertheless continue to be practised among a people who have the foremost place in the march of progress, who have even acquired a special distinction for their success in contriving other modes of meeting that particular requirement, and who send the products of these contrivances to all the markets of the world. In other words, an old art may long refuse to disappear wholly, even in the midst of conditions which seem to be necessarily fatal to its continued existence.

2. On the other hand, the complete extinction of such an art in certain countries, or parts of countries, may come suddenly, from causes which we may not be able to assign; and all knowledge and recollection of it may disappear with a like suddenness. In a few generations, all about it may be so entirely forgotten that, when the people turn up the implements used in the art which have proved too hard for the teeth of time, they clothe them with mysteries and superstitions, and treat them with veneration.

That this may happen is proved by what has been said about the conversion of the whorl into an *Adder Stone* or *Charm*. In like manner the stone axe or celt becomes a *Thunder-bolt*, and supernatural

qualities are assigned to it. The lapse of ages is not necessary for this, as we naturally think and are accustomed to be told. A single century can do more in such matters than we commonly acknowledge. The dress of superstition, which clothes objects of which the use is forgotten, is far from being a thing rarely seen, though it presents itself in different aspects, and with varying degrees of completeness. It is interesting, however, to remember that it is the handiwork of the rude or so-called stone-age man which becomes an object of veneration in countries with a high civilization. The reverse would be much more easily understood. That a minie-rifle should be worshipped by a Bushman seems a not unnatural thing. It is more difficult to see why, to nearly all the cultured nations of Western Europe, a stone celt becomes a *Thunder-bolt*, a whorl an *Adder Bead*, and a flint arrow-head an *Elf Dart*, and why these relics of a complete or comparative barbarism should be venerated in the midst of civilized and cultured people. The man who ought to know that these objects are merely the tools or weapons of his barbaric forefathers is the very man who worships them; and it seems to me that if we wish to study correctly the history of the human race as a whole, we can neither ignore nor omit the study of these curious wanderings from conditions of high culture and civilization.

3. When an old art dies out, in consequence of being supplanted or superseded by a new art, which does the same thing in a practically better way, the dying-out may be and perhaps always is, by a process of debasement or degradation. It is not easy to over-estimate the value of this inference, since it means that the rude forms of an implement may follow as well as precede the more finished forms – that it would be unsafe to say of two specimens of the same implement that the ruder was necessarily the older – and that, of any particular kind of implement, the rudest forms of all may be the very latest, or those fashioned when the implement had all but passed out of use.

4. We sometimes, without good reason, speak contemptuously of an implement or contrivance as rude and primitive. Looking at the thing itself, rather than at its purpose and the way it fulfils it, we think of it as an outcome of a poor and feeble state of mind. But on careful examination, we may find it suitable for its work, capable of doing it well, and indicating more ingenuity in contrivance and more skill in construction than we were ready to suppose from a superficial examination.

If we desire only to find the evidences of a want of intellectuality in the works either of the early or of the existing savage, we shall certainly find them, and probably little else. But if, on the other hand, we look also for signs of intellectuality and of a capacity for culture, we shall as certainly find more of these than we have been prepared to expect.

5. A very simple and a rude method of doing work, such, for instance, as hand-spinning, may be the only way of doing that work which is practised even among races whom we cannot call barbarous, and who are widely separated from each other both in time and space, as, for example, among the peoples of ancient Egypt and present India.

Still further, the very same rude and simple method of doing the work in question may be the only way of doing that work among races whom we unhesitatingly call barbarous, and who are also widely separated from each other both in time and space, as, for example, among the prehistoric lake-dwellers of Switzerland and the existing savages of South Central Africa.

6. In all scientific inquiries, but more, perhaps, in archaeological investigations than in any other, conclusions formed on merely negative evidence are to be distrusted.

7. We may fall into error if we fix the intellectual capacity of a nation, a community, or an individual, as low, because we find that they practise, or he practises something which we call, and perhaps correctly call, rude and primitive. Such a thing furnishes no proof of want of capacity; frequently, indeed, it does not even furnish proof of want of culture. The mental powers of those Scotchwomen who still use the spindle and whorl is not a whit inferior to that of those who do not use it, nor is their culture in any degree or respect below that of their countrywomen generally in a similar social position.

So much for the inferences which appear to me to flow from what has been said about whorls. It may be thought that I carry those inferences too far, seeing that they are all drawn from the story of one object. It seems to me, however, that they are fairly drawn, and I think it an advantage at once to reveal the general character of the lessons which are to be taught by the stories of many other objects in the lectures which follow. ...

References Cited

Mitchell, Arthur, 1881. The Past in the Present: What is Civilization? New York: Harper and Brothers.

Pitt-Rivers, A. Lane-Fox. 1875a. On the Evolution of Culture. Procs. of the Royal Institution 7: 496-520
_____. 1875b. Principles of Classification. Journal of the Anthropological Institute 4: 293-308.

Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 11, 1876.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS:

David Horn (Comparative Studies, Ohio State University) is conducting research for a book on the body as a source of evidence in criminal anthropology and forensic medicine, including a chapter dealing with the criminal anthropologist Lombroso and other Italian criminologists who carried on electric shock experiments on pain thresholds as an index of civilization.

Sergei Kan (Anthropology, Dartmouth College) is carrying on a research project on "Lev Shternberg (1861-1927), the founder of modern Russian/Soviet anthropology."

Robert A. LeVine (Education, Harvard) is undertaking a monograph on the history of culture and personality studies in the United States, 1920-60, from its emergence in the post-WWI period to its "replacement" by "psychological anthropology."

Elizabeth Stassinis (Anthropology, University of Virginia) is working on a dissertation entitled "Ruthlessly: Ruth Benedict's pseudonyms and the art of science writ large."

Joseph Marlin (Field Museum, Chicago) is assisting John Terrell in research on the metaphors used by anthropologists to describe cultures.

William Willard (Comparative American Cultures, Washington State University) is doing research on Archie Phinney, an enrolled Nez Perce tribal member and student of Franz Boas, who published a volume of Nez Perce texts in 1934, and spent the years 1932-37 at the Leningrad Institute of Ethnography.